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SUBJECT: KOSOVO: ASSESSING LIKELY ELECTION PARTICIPATION

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY.

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Debate among stakeholders continues on modalities for and risks associated with holding elections on November 15 in the new Serb-majority municipalities formed through Ahtisaari-mandated decentralization, but we are edging towards a solution along U.S.-shaped lines: elections in at least one or two new, Serb-majority municipalities (possibly more), but not putting decentralization at risk by staging failed elections where the outcome is predictable and negative. After reviewing new, more reliable polling data now available to us and considering other factors, our assessment is that Kllokot and Ranilug offer the greatest likelihood for successful elections, where Serb voters will both participate in and win local office. Slightly more risky, but worth looking at further, are Partesh and "New" Novo Brdo. Gracanica and North Mitrovica, the most significant Serb settlements poised to become new municipalities, are not yet ready to hold elections. Our Quint partners and the ICO are pressing us on both Gracanica, and to a lesser extent, North Mitrovica, but we believe that the goal is a successful outcome to the elections rather than the process for its own sake. Therefore, we have counseled against moving forward with municipalities where the risk of failure is unacceptably high, especially with regard to Gracanica. We can ill afford outcomes that will discredit decentralization, the Ahtisaari Plan's central tenet for Serb integration in a stable and democratic Kosovo.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY CONT: With the above in mind, the Ambassador has suggested to our Quint partners and proposed to PM Thaci and President Sejdiu that November elections in Kllokot and Ranilug, coupled with a plan to create conditions for elections in the others by next spring, offers the best way forward. The UK Ambassador here has told us privately that this approach could satisfy his government's wish that decentralization be demonstrably moving forward, but he continues to argue for 38 during Quint exchanges. France is clearly okay with 38-minus; Germany and Italy appear to follow this line but still want to see Gracanica included. Events of the last week have probably stifled enthusiasm for trying to include North Mitrovica at this time. Both Thaci and Sejdiu have signaled that they could support elections in some new municipalities provided there is confidence the Serbs will win, and we avoid a situation that would annul an outcome which elects a

minority Albanian. Our recommendation is to position ourselves in favor of 33-plus, the current municipalities along with Kllokot and Ranilug, and if we can get greater clarity on several issues, perhaps "New" Novo Brdo and Partesh. END SUMMARY

Ethnic Breakdown of Serb-Majority Municipalities

13. (SBU) As debate continues locally on how many municipalities should participate in the November 15 municipal elections -- the 33 existing municipalities or these municipalities plus some, or all six, of the proposed new Serb-majority municipalities -- we are assessing what may occur if the new municipalities were to participate in the elections. The new Serb-majority municipalities are Novo Brdo, North Mitrovica, Gracanica, Ranilug, Partesh, and Kllokot. Demographic data in Kosovo are unreliable and coarse, but using information gleaned from the International Civilian Office (ICO) and OSCE, we can approximate the ethnic breakdowns in each of the new municipalities (see Table 1) that should provide a starting point for estimates of voting outcomes in the November municipal elections.

Table 1: New Serb-Majority Municipalities

Municipality	% Alb	% Serb	Pop.
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Gracanica	11	89	18,600
Kllokot	26	74	4,500
North Mitro	10	90	20,000
New Novo Brdo	26	74	9,000
Partesh	0	100	5,200

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Ranilug	0	100	5,000
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Kosovo Serb Opinions on Elections, Decentralization

14. (SBU) Successful decentralization hinges both on building functioning municipalities and Serbs winning elections in those new municipalities. The presence of a Serb majority is no guarantee of a Serb victory. Serb turnout is the key. Our greatest concern remains that a small number of Albanian residents in each of the new municipalities might be sufficient to elect Albanian candidates. This is no theoretical threat. In the 2007 municipal elections, Strpce municipality, which is roughly 66 per cent Serb, saw Albanian parties capture over 99 per cent of all votes cast. The UN Special Representative (SRSG) intervened and installed a Serb mayor and ethnic Serb municipal assembly members. For reasons we have already reported, we are skeptical of claims that some within the international community are making about the prospects for meaningful Serb turnout. We now have available to us more focused polling for Kllokot and Gracanica that we believe provides a more reliable basis for making turnout assessments. The results are summarized below. (Note: The poll was conducted by USAID-implementer the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in August. We have asked NDI to expand the poll to include all the new Serb-majority municipalities. End Note)

Kllokot: Some Good News

15. (SBU) The NDI poll shows that 25 percent of Serbs in Kllokot plan on participating in the November municipal elections. When respondents were asked if they would vote in the elections if Kllokot became a new municipality, the likelihood of participation jumped from 25 percent to 38 percent. While a quarter of Kllokot's new municipal population will be Albanian, the poll suggests that its Serb residents have embraced decentralization. Certainly, elections in Kllokot will probably be a close race. Using our polling numbers and population estimates from ICO, we can make a rough approximation that 1265 Serbs will go to the polls in Kllokot alongside 1125 Albanians. These numbers underscore that even with relatively positive numbers on possible Serb turnout holding an

election is a risk, particularly if the Serb vote splits, but this may be a risk worth taking. An additional reason for optimism is that tangible, meaningful decentralization beyond merely establishing a Municipal Preparation Team (MPT) is beginning to take place in Kllokot. These two factors -- positive indicators on turnout and progress on the ground -- are reasons for including Kllokot in the pool of municipalities going to the polls.

Gracanica: Too Ambivalent and Too Important to Rush

¶6. (SBU) Gracanica is one of the two most politically significant of the new Serb-majority municipalities. [Note: The other is North Mitrovica, and events over the last several days -- i.e., ongoing tensions between Albanians and Serbs with occasional outbreaks of violence -- make clear that it is nowhere near ready for elections. End Note] Our NDI poll shows that only 14 percent of Serbs in Gracanica intend to vote in November. Unlike Kllokot, this number is constant; it does not improve if Gracanica became a new municipality before election day. In addition, though an MPT has been established in Gracanica, unlike in Kllokot, there has been little municipal development program. No Serb party has a dominant position in Gracanica; there are at least five Serb parties who could participate in elections. They would likely split the Serb vote. We expect Albanians, by comparison, to rally around the Prime Minister's PDK party. This dynamic -- a small, divided Serb turnout and a united Albanian populous -- creates the very real possibility that Albanians could win power in most significant Serb enclave south of the Ibar River.

Ranilug and Partesh: It's About More than Numbers

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¶7. (SBU) When Ranilug becomes a new municipality, virtually 100 percent of its residents will be Serbs. While we have no polling data, the Deputy Mayor of Kamenica -- the mother municipality ceding territory to Ranilug -- is a Serb from Ranilug who has long lobbied us to kick start decentralization there and describes a community that is ready to stand on its own and wants to participate in Kosovo institutions. (NOTE: The ICO and Ministry for Local Government Administration appointed Ranilug's Municipal Preparation Team on August 28. END NOTE) With apparent buy-in from local Serb leadership, enough Serbs may come to the polls to elect both a Serb mayor and a Serb municipal assembly that takes office with a reasonable decree of legitimacy. With no Albanians to swamp even low Serb voter participation, there is an acceptable risk of failure.

¶8. (SBU) Partesh has similar demographics to Ranilug, but it also faces more significant challenges. As an undeveloped community without any meaningful infrastructure, its MPT, once it starts working, will confront more work than in other places in establishing the basic structures necessary for creating a functioning municipality. In the absence of any local Serb leadership committed to advancing Partesh's development, the settlement might benefit by waiting for extraordinary elections in the spring, but we recommend keeping this option in play over the next couple weeks as it may help us build agreement within the Quint.

"New" Novo Brdo

¶9. (SBU) "New" Novo Brdo, builds on the existing Novo Brdo's municipal structures and redraws its municipal borders to make an Albanian municipality into a Serb municipality. The problem is that no one is quite sure what "New" Novo Brdo's demography will be. While ICO speculates that that "New" Novo Brdo will be 76-24, Serb-Albanian, estimates about Serbs in the region have varied significantly over the past several years. No one is sure. Elections in "New" Novo Brdo may be a real possibility, but we need to see reliable polling numbers prior to committing our support. Given that Albanians in Novo Brdo will be moving from a majority to a minority, we expect that "New" Novo Brdo will engender Albanian

resentment and motivate large turnout. This creates the possibility for this new Serb-majority municipality to fall under Albanian rule.

However, ICO tells us that Serbs in Novo Brdo, who currently coexist happily with an Albanian mayor, are unlikely to react angrily should Albanians win significant control in the November elections. We believe more facts are required to confirm this hypothesis, but if ICO is right, holding elections in "New" Novo Brdo may be possible, and once again, we should keep it in play for now.

Belgrade: Another College Try

¶10. (SBU) Though some within the international community dismiss the importance of signals coming from Belgrade, we continue to believe that the surest way to motivate Serb turnout is a clear signal from Belgrade that it supports decentralization and wants Kosovo Serbs to vote on November 15. We are skeptical that Belgrade will provide the clear signal we are looking for, but Quint partners, particularly the UK, want to make another run at it. We support making the effort, but in the wake of the GOK-EULEX flare up over the police protocol, we advise against approaching another status neutral organization (i.e., Council of Europe) about a statement Belgrade would sign up to "outside the context of Ahtisaari" supporting decentralization. The reaction from the GOK would likely be neuralgic.

Recommendation

¶11. (SBU) Ambassador made clear during the August 28 Quint meeting that we cannot support elections in 38 municipalities. North

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Mitrovica is off the table. If Belgrade were to give an unambiguous signal that it is encouraging Serbs to participate in Kosovo's municipal elections, then we could reexamine the possibility of including Gracanica. We are, however, running out of time and need to come to a consensus within the next two weeks. The Quint will meet again on September 11 to review information and, we hope, agree on a final position based on instructions from capitals. (Regardless of the decision, Kosovo's Central Elections Commission faces a critical benchmark on September 15 when it must certify parties and candidates in each of the municipalities, something that it cannot do until there is agreement on where elections will take place.)

¶12. (SBU) At this stage, Kllokot and Ranilug appear to offer the best opportunities for moving forward, and we believe that the Kosovars will support this suggestion. Thaci told Ambassador on August 26 that he was open to including one or perhaps two new municipalities in the November elections, provided that we have strong confidence that Serbs will run, vote and win. This openness, however, also comes with a warning. Both Thaci and Local Government Administration Minister Sadri Ferati have told us consistently for weeks that this year Albanians will not step aside if they win in Serb-majority municipalities. The Quint appears prepared to accept this risk. The UK ambassador continues to advocate for elections in all 38 municipalities within the Quint, but has suggested privately that they might settle for less.

¶13. (SBU) Introducing elections in Kllokot and Ranilug should address concerns among the Quint and the ICO that Serbs will lose faith in decentralization without them and demonstrate that the GOK and the international community are serious about the process. We will continue to explore the viability of elections in "New" Novo Brdo, Partesh, and to a lesser extent Gracanica. Our *sine qua non* for Gracanica ought to be a direct and clear message of support from Belgrade. Without that, an election in Gracanica will lead to a train wreck, which could well derail the decentralization process altogether. We should resist any temptation to include North Mitrovica. It is not ready. Politically, this will also necessitate balancing it with one or two new municipalities that will also not participate in the elections so that it does not stand out as an exception further underscoring the north-south divide. Regardless of the final list, risks will remain, and we need to go

into this with our eyes wide open. Our goal should be to limit these risks by a) holding elections only where the calculated risk makes sense, and b) developing a plan for building the new municipalities over the next 6 to 8 months in order to lay the groundwork to elections next spring.

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